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TAGS: [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [MCAP](#) [PREL](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: PHILIPPINE ARMED FORCES CHIEF OF STAFF VOICES
STRONG SUPPORT FOR NEW DEFENSE SECRETARY

REF: MANILA 3033

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney for Reasons
1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: In a private September 7 meeting with the Ambassador, Armed Forces Chief of Staff General Hermogenes Esperon, addressed recent command changes and the emphasis on restraint in the wake of the July and August attacks on Philippine military units on Basilan. He also reiterated the need for continued cooperation with the USG, including in developing civilian infrastructure, in Mindanao. The general said that he continues to enjoy the strong support of President Arroyo and offered a favorable assessment of the new Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro. End Summary.

Command Changes a Positive

12. (C) Citing recent changes to the command structure of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), General Esperon said he was pleased with the new assignments and that they reflected an attempt to try and achieve a balance between the services so that the top commanders feel they have a chance to rise. The general invited the Ambassador without reservation to visit the new commanders and to inaugurate additional U.S.-sponsored development projects in the region and welcomed future projects. He specifically encouraged the Ambassador to meet the new AFP engineering battalion in Basilan that will be part of the National Development Support Command, bringing infrastructure improvements to the island.

Learning from Difficulties

13. (C) The Ambassador told Esperon that she thought the AFP had maintained strong public support with its measured but very firm response to brutal attacks by terrorist groups and Muslim insurgents in July and August that included the beheadings of ten Filipino marines. Esperon agreed, saying that he was pleased with the progress on Jolo and Basilan, and that although there is always the tendency for the public to overreact and criticize, in this instance, he directed the commanders to learn from these difficult experiences and not be distracted by media reports or public opinion. Esperon referred to the attacks on Basilan on July 10 as a "series of bungles" on the part of the commander. Following strong cultural norms, rather than remove the commander immediately, Esperon chose to wait until a regular troop rotation a couple of weeks later, thereby allowing the commander to avoid public embarrassment. The general specifically requested U.S. assistance with intelligence and information gathering

on Basilan, saying it would help the AFP in their efforts to track down terrorists.

Excellent Cooperation with Political Leadership

14. (C) Turning to the political front, Esperon characterized new Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro (reftel) as "absolutely focused on Philippine Defense Reform" and being "very plugged into the process," despite being on the job just over a month. Esperon said that Teodoro was politically savvy and had a good feeling for the military. "He wants to be everywhere," Esperon said, and underscored his approval of Teodoro saying he would support Teodoro "forever -- he is going places." Esperon lauded Teodoro's desire to keep defense reform effort moving, adding that Teodoro recognized that retraining was more important than equipment at this stage. "We may not have a world class military, but we are working our way there," Esperon told the Ambassador.

15. (C) Comment: The Ambassador meets regularly with General Esperon, but on this occasion, Esperon was particularly laudatory of the role the USG plays in helping to track down terrorists while also improving civilian infrastructure and the economy in Mindanao. Several times during the conversation, he repeated his support for the Embassy public outreach in Mindanao, emphasizing that he or Defense Secretary would be available to accompany the Ambassador on

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any public appearances designed to highlight U.S.-Philippine cooperation, especially on Mindanao. End Comment.

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